‘This is a correct decision’: An Analysis of Some Aspects of Style in John Berger’s Essays

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Essays form a substantial part of John Berger’s œuvre, and figure largely in discussions of his work, but they have not been subject to stylistic analysis. Four short passages from essays from the 1980s through to the early 2000s are analysed in terms of lexis, syntax, coherence and cohesion, phonological orchestration, and the constitution of the speaker. The speaker is shown to use formal lexis and syntax, and to produce rhetorically highly organised texts, which however, at times, lack clear topical coherence/cohesion. The speaker is configured as an authoritative figure, with mystic inclinations and access to remarkable resources of knowledge.

1.1.

There is a growing scholarly interest in the essay. Recent studies and collections address the complexities and the possibilities of the form. (Genre seems an inadequate term to designate the capaciousness of the essay.) Commentators clearly feel that it is an appropriate kind of text for contemporary times. For example, Jeff Porter declares that ‘[i]n its directness and intimacy, the essay is the ideal form for the twenty-first century’.1 Its dramatisation of thought, its indeterminacy, its hybridity (its inclusion of other forms and genres within its ambit), its provocativeness are, for Porter, its key components.2 Carl H. Klaus opts for a similar set of features: ‘naturalness, openness, or looseness’ as opposed to rigid formulae, and ‘a mode of trying out ideas, of exploration rather than persuasion, of reflection rather than conviction’.3 Such accounts of the essay echo earlier attempts to analyse its specificities. Georg Lukács, in his difficult ‘Über das Wesen und Form des Essays’ (On the Being and the Form of the Essay) (1910), inter alia, points to the fragmentariness, the inconclusiveness, and the self-irony of the essay. ‘It is impossible for two essays to contradict each other: each creates, after all, its

2 Ibid., pp. xxi–xxiv.
David Malcolm

own world.'\(^4\) Later he adds: 'The essayist warns off his own proud hopes, which sometimes think that they have come close to the ultimate. […] But with irony he fits into this smallness, into the eternal smallness of the work of deepest thought in relation to life, and with an ironic modesty he goes on to underline that smallness.'\(^5\) Theodor W. Adorno sees the essay similarly in his well-known ‘Der Essay als Form’ (The Essay as Form) (1958, written 1954–1958). Here, too, are emphasised and lauded the unconstraint of the essay, ‘die Muße des Kindlichen’ (the leisureliness of the childish),\(^6\) its rebellion against traditional (and, for Adorno, repressively Spartan) thought and its demarcations, and its being fragmentarily and inconclusively abundant (‘radical in its non-radicalness, in its holding back from all reduction to a principle, in its accenting of the partial over the total, in its fragmentariness’).\(^7\) Hans Peter Balmer sums up the essay in similar terms: ‘skepticism in relation to norm, duty, system, in relation to fixed subjectivity and use of language, such an enormously deep reservation.’\(^8\)

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5 Lukács, p. 37. The translation is mine. The original reads: ‘Der Essayist winkt den eigenen, stolzen Hoffnungen, die manchmal dem Letzten nahe gekommen zu sein wähnen, ab. […] Aber ironisch fügt er sich in diese Kleinheit ein, in die ewige Kleinheit der tiefsten Gedankenarbeit dem Leben gegenüber und mit ironischer Bescheidenheit unterstreicht er sie noch.’


7 Adorno, p. 68. ‘Radikal im Nichtradikalismus, in der Enthal tung von aller Reduktion auf ein Prinzip, im Akzentuieren des Partiellen gegenüber der Totale, im Stückhaf ten.’ The translation is mine.